

Who owns Antarctica?

When European explorers went out to other parts of the world in search of trade and territories, they found other people with their own cultures and ways of life.

Antarctica was different.

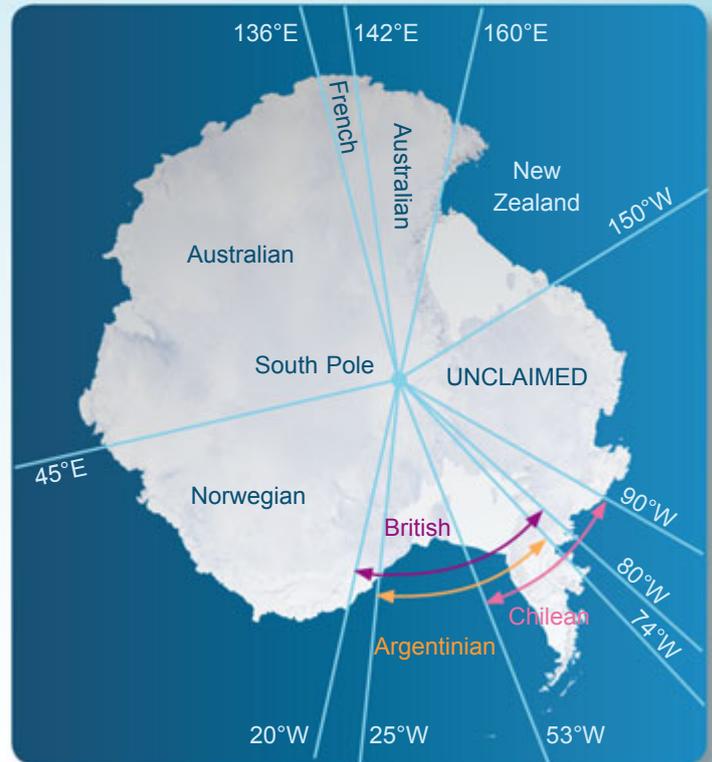
When the explorers first visited Antarctica, they found no human inhabitants and no one had any claim to the territory. Even as the number of sealers, whalers and scientists going there grew, no one seemed to worry about whose territory it was. It was felt there was plenty of room for everyone. But early in the twentieth century, with more and more money being spent on expeditions to Antarctica, people started to take an interest in who owned the place.

Lines on the map and feet on the ground

The first country to claim territory in Antarctica was Great Britain; it made a general claim to a large amount of Antarctica in 1908. In those days Britain was like a superpower and Australia and New Zealand were part of the British Empire. In later years parts of the British claim became Australian and New Zealand territories.

How does a country actually 'claim' territory in Antarctica when it is not possible to fill the place with settlers?

Expeditions can land on various parts of the coast but it is extremely difficult to move into the interior. Aeroplanes can be flown over the inland and have been doing so since the 1920s. (There are now airstrips on the ice.) When an expedition lands on the coast they can put in marker pegs, raise the national flag and read a proclamation. This will only be witnessed by the expedition members, and a few inquisitive penguins.



Territorial claims in Antarctica

They will take photos, of course. Essentially the only way a country can really claim territory in Antarctica is to draw boundaries on a map and tell everybody about it. This is what the governments of seven nations did last century. As can be seen from the map, some of the claims overlap. Other nations do not recognise any such agreements and claims.

During the 1957 International Geophysical Year, twelve nations established numerous research stations across Antarctica. In 1959 these nations and thirty-eight other nations agreed to suspend territorial claims and preserve the continent for non-military, scientific research.

There may be an agreement to protect flora and fauna but mining and drilling for oil are more difficult issues to resolve. Some suggest Antarctica should become one giant wilderness park.

Adapted from *Antarctica* by John Collerson, HBJ, 1992.